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ABSTRACT

The prevailing focus in gerontology is on services rather than relationships. Consequently we are less familiar with the prevalence of kinkeeping. In intergenerational family research, women as family kinkeepers have been described as the hubs of family solidarity, bringing their families together, corresponding with family members, and monitoring family members' behavior. There is no adequate explanation for these voluntary kinship ties. We do not know why the death of a kinkeeper in one family leads to gradual distance between family members, and in another to the inheritance of the role by a daughter or a granddaughter. Because families are arenas of reciprocal influences, kinkeeping is not a one-way service from kinkeeper to other family members, but a reciprocal, mutual relationship. In families with tight ties, the mutuality approaches equality. In families with looser ties, the acts of kinkeeping may be one-way. One measure of the strength of family ties could be the mutuality of kinkeeping behaviors. From this proposition of mutuality comes the suggestion that there may be preparatory socialization for kinkeeping. Instead of thinking of a single kinkeeper, it may be better to think of a chain of kinkeepers for most modified extended families, and to consider splits in kinkeeping, in which kinkeeping functions are shared with other relatives. For example, middle-aged women may tend to be the kinkeepers while older women may serve more as the focus of kinkeeping activity than as active kinkeepers themselves. (NRB)

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OLD WAYS IN NEW BODIES: HANDING DOWN KINKEEPING

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, San Antonio, TX, November 16-20, 1984.

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Old Ways in New Bodies: Handing Down Kinkeeping*

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When I returned, after a quarter century, to complete a Ph.D. dissertation, I knew I wanted to study family relationships, and beyond that intergenerational relationships. One of my first ideas was to compare a first-born line with a later-born line: oldest daughter, her oldest daughter, and her oldest daughter with a later-born daughter, her later-born daughter, and her later-born daughter. As it happened, I ended up doing a simpler study because Bernice Neugarten said that we didn't know enough about adult parent-child relations in general to become that specific. As usual, she was right. But what I was after then is related to the question I am going to attend to today, the transmission of family kinkeeping. You will notice that my original proposal was restricted to lines of daughters. I think I had a vague idea then that the oldest daughter lineage would be more likely to do the kinkeeping. We still don't know if that is true. In fact, we know remarkably little about kinkeeping altogether. The fact that we know somewhat more about caregiving of older parents by their children reflects the prevailing focus in gerontology: services rather than relationships, applied rather than more basic research.

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Let me first justify my interest in this topic by referring to what we know about prevalence, prevalence of caregiving as well as prevalence of kinkeeping. I don't think I will astonish anybody here by stating that the family is not dying, that nuclear families are usually joined together into modified extended kinship networks, and that most older people who need care get it from members of their families: from wives if they are men and from daughters if they are women. Not only do I not expect you to be astonished, I don't think I have to elaborate or provide citations--although, of course, I will be happy to do so on request. What I do think you may be less familiar with is the prevalence of kinkeeping. When Victor Marshall and his colleagues in Ontario (Marshall & Rosenthal, 1982) asked members of 3-generation families--not necessarily living together--to designate their family kinkeeper, more than half knew what the interviewer meant, could name such a person, and could describe his or her--almost always her of course--tasks.

Perhaps the first persons to use the term "kinkeeper" were Young and Wilmott (1962), who studied London families two decades ago. Gunild Hagestad (in press) described, from her 3-generation Chicago data, kinkeeping women as the hubs of family solidarity, bringing their families together, remembering birthdays, writing Christmas cards, corresponding with their own and their husband's family too, and monitoring family members' behavior. Further indirect evidence is provided by her data on middle-aged divorce.

Those divorces whose parents were still living were more likely to turn to other family members for help than those whose parents were no longer living. Presumably the parents when they were alive were kinkeepers and when they died nobody took over their kinkeeping. Young and Willmott had also reported that sib relationships became attenuated when parents died. And so did Colleen Johnson (1982).

The mean number of kin recognized as kin by members of London Italian families, incidentally, is 203. Italian families, of course, are notoriously clannish. When I teach Psychology of the Family, at least two-thirds of my class seems to be Italian. Most of the others seem to be Jewish and Blacks, with a recent increase of Orientals. All these groups are noted as "family" oriented. It is my impression that the rest of these enormous classes is made up of students who found the time convenient, or believe they know enough about the family to make it a "snap" course.

When Colleen Johnson (1982) compared Italian families with families in which only one spouse was Italian and with Protestant families in which neither spouse was Italian, she found that practically all the pure Italian families (59 out of 60) had parents living nearby, if they had living parents--but fewer of the other two groups did. Furthermore, 73% of the pure Italians had seen a living parent within the past week, but only somewhat better than half of the families in the other two groups had.

There was no class difference in contact among the Italian families but there was a class difference in amount of contact with parents among the WASP families; working class families had more family contact.

Demographic data like these cannot give us information about causality, of course. When family ties are tight, household units stay closer together, perhaps, than when they are looser. Italians don't marry out when their ties are tight. Or household units that move apart because of externally induced reasons like economic opportunities eventually loosen their ties, or marry out. This is not to say that tightness means positive feelings. In fact, as Cohler and Grunebaum (1981) have reported, generational togetherness can go together with distress. Strength of feeling is not the same as positiveness of feeling but rather with a combination of strong positive and strong negative feelings, and thus with ambivalence in many cases.

One of the questions in this area of voluntary kinship ties is why some families remain tightly bonded when others drift apart or fragment into smaller units. One possible explanation for Johnson's findings is offered by exchange theory, which would say that members of Italian families somehow get more from each other in the way of economic or emotional rewards than members of non-Italian families. But why? And what is it they get? Why does the death of a kinkeeper in one family lead to the distancing of her children from each other while the death of

another leads to the inheritance of the role by a daughter, or granddaughter, or daughter-in-law?

Since we in our culture like to feel that time is associated with progress, we are happy to point to what we would consider has improved in recent years. One such instance is the recognition by psychologists that socialization and influencing is reciprocal, not one-way. Parents of infants are profoundly affected by their infant's behavior just as they profoundly influence and shape that behavior. Parents of adults are influenced by their adult children and in turn influence them. Those of us who are interested in generational relations have seen that younger generations influence the values and beliefs of their parents and grandparents just as they derive their family values from older generations and transform them in accordance with the prevailing cohort culture to which they belong. In one of her recent papers, Hagestad (in press) made a point that I found particularly enlightening, that one of the important functions of the extended family is the interpretation by the different generations in the family of the cultures of each. Older generations explain to their children the past; younger generations explain to their parents the future.

Because families are arenas of reciprocal influence, kinkeeping is not a one-way service from the kinkeeper to her brood. If kinkeeping women are the hubs of family solidarity, there must be spokes of reciprocal solidarity radiating into

these hubs. Kinkeepers can issue invitations to Friday night or Sunday dinners, but their invitees have to attend. Kinkeepers remember birthdays, but their birthdays are remembered in return. They write Christmas cards and get Christmas cards in return. They write letters and they get letters. They telephone and are spoken to on the telephone; they even get telephone calls back. They monitor their family's behavior, and their family members report their news to the kinkeeper. Kinkeeping is a reciprocal, a mutual relationship. In families where the ties are tight, the mutuality comes close to equal. In families where the ties are looser, the acts of kinkeeping may approach one-way. In other words, one measure of the strength of family ties could be the mutuality of kinkeeping behaviors.

Growing out of this proposition of mutuality is a further one that suggests that there are preparatory socializations for kinkeeping. Which brings me back to my original proposal of studying the oldest daughter lines in families. Is the oldest daughter of a kinkeeper herself a second-order kinkeeper, a lieutenant kinkeeper? Does she think of herself from early childhood--and get thought of by her parents, grandparents, and siblings--as the heir apparent to this role? And are there family behaviors that can be observed in childhood that reflect this process? When I was nine years old, we--my mother, sister, and I--visited my mother's family for several months and stayed

in the large house that was the home of one of my mother's sisters and their brother and their mother, my grandmother, as well as of the children of this aunt and uncle, my cousins. This was a stormy period for me, perhaps for more than one reason. But one I can easily identify is the confrontation between me--the oldest grandchild--and my cousin who was the oldest daughter of my mother's oldest sister. Each of us--my cousin and I--believed we were the boss of our other cousins, our generation's kinkeeper, if you will. There were six of us cousins in the house at that time, and two others not too far away who visited frequently, so that our arena consisted of eight people, although the age range, from one year to nine years of age, may make it seem that the use of the work "people" is presumptuous. Not only were my cousin and I involved in this confrontation, but the other cousins lined up on one side or the other; the parents and grandmother were also involved. The climax scene involved the decision of which of us was to push the carriage in which the one-year old lay. I remember the scene but I don't remember the outcome--I suspect my aunt retrieved the carriage and baby and removed the battlegrcund. Maybe I lost. The point of this story is the fact that we were in the process of establishing our heirarchy of kinkeepers. That we were in fact in training for the future role of major kinkeeper. The existing major kinkeeper at that time was my grandmother. Her lieutenant at that time was her oldest daughter. Instead of

thinking of a single kinkeeper, in other words, it seems better to think of a chain of kinkeepers for most modified extended families. The links of the chain are themselves preparing for the future major position.

Equating kinkeepers with oldest daughters is of course overly simplistic. We know from accumulating survey data about caregivers that it is not necessarily the oldest daughter who becomes the caregiver of her mother when that mother needs help, nor is it necessarily the youngest daughter, nor the closest-living daughter. Where several daughters are available, the decision as to who does it can become complex.

I am not sure what the relationship is between caregiving and kinkeeping. Is the kinkeeper likely to be the one who has previously given care? Or, since it is the failing kinkeeper who may need the care, does the caregiver take over kinkeeping in the process of caregiving? These questions I offer for future research. If the caregiver is not the kinkeeper, is the quality of care or the feelings about the care--on the part of either the care-needer or the caregiver--different?

When I asked one of my graduate students, "Who is your family's kinkeeper?" she said, "I am, and have been since I got married. I keep the connections between Michael and my family and also his family. I visit his 86-year old grandmother--with my mother." Then she qualified her response to say that she was the kinkeeper in her household unit of herself, her husband, and

baby, but that her mother was the kinkeeper in the larger family unit. She described her mother as a professional kinkeeper, one who had inherited all her father's family as well as her own when her parents died, saw each of her children twice a week, kept in touch with all aunts and uncles, drove her father-in-law to visit his sister, and in other words kept busy with relatives all over the country. My student was the prime sub-kinkeeper, living nearer her mother than either of her sisters, and assisting her mother in her kinkeeping duties. She is, incidentally, the youngest of three sisters and so does not fit the oldest daughter hypothesis. One issue raised by this illustration is the possibility that we should consider not only chains of kinkeepers but also splits in kinkeeping. Under what conditions are kinkeeping functions shared with other relatives? As one member of this audience suggested, there may be committees of kinkeepers. Hagestad makes the point that it tends to be middleaged women who are kinkeepers, and that grandmothers, the oldest generation living, may serve more as the focus of kinkeeping activity than be active kinkeepers themselves.

So far, I have mentioned the function of kinkeeping and its prevalence, and socialization for kinkeeping. I want to raise two further points: variation by ethnic group and the relation to time. Johnson's study of Italians in Boston shows some of the variation that exists, but it is possible to see even wider extremes, which I only throw out here for your consideration.

I want to make two points relevant to time. First, the greater life expectancy of people today means that the turnover of kinkeepers may be either slower or delayed. If the kinkeeper lives well into the 90s, her daughter does not inherit the role until she is at least 70. This may in turn be associated with several claimants to the role, to splitting of functions, and to confrontations between potential kinkeepers reminiscent of the confrontation between my cousin and me.

But there is another aspect of time that is more interesting. An article by Halpern and Wagner (1984) in a recent issue of Family History discusses the difference between linear and cyclical time. Linear time, like years in history or chronological age, refers to the cumulative aspect of culture.

Cyclical time is recurrent and predictable. Family events are more appropriately measured in cyclical time, as are other sacred and ritualistic aspects of life. As each omega generation dies, a new omega steps into its place. Kinkeeping, the function of older generations in the family, is a recurrent phenomenon if the family is to survive. In Marshall and Rosenthal's (1982) description of the handing on of the kinkeeping role at the death of the mother, the respondent's sound as if they kind of just happened to be there to take on the duties by default. I am suggesting that there is more regularity and predictability in the process, that it doesn't just happen but that the successors, the heir apparents, are awaiting in the wings, have been trained

for the role most of their lives, and when they are handed down the scepter, know what to do with it.

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